

Title	In exciting times
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/3956/
Date	2010
Citation	Coldwell, Paul (2010) In exciting times. Printmaking Today, 19 (3). pp. 9-11. ISSN 09609253
Creators	Coldwell, Paul

Usage Guidelines

Please refer to usage guidelines at <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact ualresearchonline@arts.ac.uk.

License: Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives

Unless otherwise stated, copyright owned by the author

In Exciting Times

As an artist who has been involved in printmaking since I first went to college in the early 1970's, it has always been clear to me that prints account for some of the most beautiful, compelling and exciting images within our visual culture. It is difficult for me to imagine a world without such masterpieces as Durer's *Melancholia*, Goya's *Disasters of War*, Hokusai's *The Great Wave* or more recently Rego's *Nursery Rhymes* or Caulfield's *Prints after the Poems of Larforgue* to name just a few. Prints are also accessible in terms of price and so for many of us; our first opportunity to buy art has been through the purchasing of a print. Furthermore because of the fact that prints are multiples, they are able to circulate and appear in a variety of places and contexts. Therefore when I was approached by Black Dog Publishing to write an overview of contemporary printmaking, it was both an exciting opportunity as well as a considerable challenge. I wanted to reflect on printmaking, not from the perspective of 'how artists make prints' but 'why'. I also wanted to look back towards those key figures that have shaped printmaking's history and place the work of contemporary artists within a broader context.

I have been perplexed by the way that printmaking is still too often regarded as a secondary activity, subordinate to painting and sculpture. This attitude is endorsed by the way prints are separated and rarely displayed alongside other works in permanent collections, in the Tate, for example or in the number of occasions that, when surveying an artist's work, their prints are either left out or marginalised. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Roy Lichtenstein exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, 2004 when only one or two prints were displayed. This for an artist whose work has been predicated on the exploration of graphic languages and for whom suites of prints such as his series *Cathedral*, and *Haystacks* rank amongst his finest work and act as essays which reveal his both his approach to process as well as make implicit his historical references. Likewise in the recent Henry Moore exhibition at the Tate, where despite the artist's vast body of printworks over many decades including the lithograph *Sculptural Objects* 1949 made for the ground breaking School Prints project or the beautiful series of *Elephant Skulls* etchings 1969, none of his graphic work was displayed.

There is still considerable misunderstanding about printmaking, primarily focusing on confusion between works made through a medium, which is capable of producing multiple copies as apposed to a reproduction where an original exists in another form, e.g. a painting. Taking this idea as a starting point, it is self evident when looking at for example proofs states of an etching by Paula Rego, how the image evolves within the language of the medium. She builds upon an initial framework of a simple etched line drawing, onto which she literally paints in tone through aquatint, gradually evolving the print into a complete picture. It could be argued that Rego's prints, her etchings in particular should be read as miniature paintings, fully resolved and complete. In for example the progressive states of *The Wild Duck* 1990, one is privy to the artist's thought process, as the image gradually changes in focus and emphasis in much the same way as a director takes his cast of actors from initial run through, to a shaped and meaningful performance.

Rego draws heavily on previous art including that of Goya and children's illustrations, as does Nana Shiomi, a Japanese artist now living in London. For Shiomi it is the ukiyo-ye tradition of woodcuts that provides a clear framework from which she develops her language. While Shiomi is primarily concerned with the organisation of space as evidenced in these Japanese prints, a construction that becomes a stage to picture her selected objects, a further take on this tradition can be found in the work of Masami Teraoki. In, for example *Geisha in a Bath* 2008, from the AIDS series, he pictures a geisha bathing, surrounded by condoms, mimicking the style, colour and composition of the traditional Japanese woodcuts but sharply bringing them into a contemporary focus with their reference to AIDS and safe sex.

The eroticism in Japanese prints which Teraoki draws upon is intensified through the relationship of line and pattern and here there is a connection with the digitally drawn, large laser cut collage prints of Charlotte Hodes who literally forms her figures from silhouettes cut from patterns and decoration. In Hodes' work, there is a sense of constructing a new feminine landscape, an attempt to create a strong image of women, which uses the decorative language to assert power. These prints, made at the Centre for Fine Print Research at UWE, point to the way in which new technologies, both laser cut and inkjet, can be used to produce work that is both sensuous and intense.

The history of printmaking is indelibly linked to the history of technologies and all technologies were in their time, new. Digital technologies have I believe reinvigorated printmaking, both enabling totally new ways of working alongside revisiting previous technologies. Michael Craig-Martin and Julian. Opie have both embraced these new opportunities, developing prints that range from screenprints, made from images drawn with vector programmes through to monitor based work, lightboxes and in the case of Opie, lenticular prints. While Craig- Martin and Opie expand their drawn languages through computer programmes, Tim Head take this one stage further and begin to deal with the actual code of the printer as in his series *Dust Flowers* 2009, most recently seen in his exhibition *Raw Material* at Kettle's Yard. These meter square prints reveal the structure of the inkjet printer, dot-by-dot, resulting in works which in spite of the rigour of their making, have a strange sensuality and depth.

As mentioned previously, I am primarily interested in why artists engage with printmaking and how the synthesis between intention, technique and process can result in works of extraordinary power. Vija Celmins for example uses the technique of woodcut to interrogate the nature of photography. In her print *Ocean Surface* 1992, the meticulous cutting of the wood block over a period of months is in direct contrast to the instant nature of the photographic image. The photograph, now selected and isolated, becomes the subject for an intense examination of its surface information and is finally reconstituted as a woodcut print, the result of ink onto the surface of paper.

For sculptor's, printmaking has often provided a means of presenting their ideas in a manner very distinct from their three dimensional work. For Tony Cragg, one of the most inventive sculptors of his generation, his prints reflect his concerns with process and materials. Echoing the enigmatic still lives etchings of Giorgio Morandi, in Cragg's suite of prints *Laboratory Still Lives* 1988, he conjures the beakers, funnels and bottles from the chemistry lab through

the technique of spit bite, the image made from the very chemical action of acid brushed directly onto metal. Not only does underscore the fundamental nature of etching, but it is also a reminder of the act of transformation and discovery that occurs within the creative process whether this be in the arts or the sciences. For Louise Bourgeois, the tactile experience takes precedent, particularly in her dry points where the resulting tentative images reflect the physical contact of needle scratching into metal. In contrast to her public large scale sculptures, her dry points carry that nervous fragility and reaffirm the way in which the simplest of materials and techniques can result in works which both have the power to disturb and amuse. Richard Deacon, in his series, *Show & Tell*, produced through the Paragon Press imprint in 1997 presents the viewer with a disarmingly direct account of his thinking process. The suite of prints each present a photograph, ranging from an image of clouds, trees through to a baroque stone sculpture. Onto this, a drawing is superimposed which abstracts some element of the photograph. Like Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* the artist literally shows opens up a portal to his thinking process and the origins of his sculptural forms.

While for Cragg, Bourgeois and Deacon, prints are distinct from their sculptures, the Chinese artist; Wenda Gu brings print and sculpture together to form a single installation. Here print becomes one element in the installation, *Forest of Stone Steles-Retranslation & Rewriting of Tang Poetry* 1993-2005, the fragile rubbings on Japanese paper hang in contrast to the massive slate blocks from which the image is taken. The printed image and the matrix form the installation, an approach also taken by Barthélémy Toguo who in response to the rubber stamps on his passport, carved huge wooden replicas with phrases such "Number of Entries" or "Type of Visa" which themselves are used to make prints from. Both Gu and Toguo show how some of the oldest forms of printmaking still have the potency to be used a vehicle for the exploration of pressing contemporary issues.

Thomas Kilpper, takes the installation as a starting point, it being his studio, source of imagery and the very matrix from which to make his prints. In the case of *The Ring* 2000 his site was a disused office block in south London, his matrix the vast parquet office floor which served as his woodblock. He proceeded over months to carve and subsequently produce one of the largest woodcuts ever made covering some 400 square metres. As an added indication of his irreverent approach to tradition and his disregard for niceties, the private view for the work was held on site, with the audience standing on the very floor from which the images were made. Gu, Toguo and Kilpper offer a sharp riposte to the idea that printmaking is a secondary activity as with Bartolomeu dos Santos, who found within printmaking a means to express not only his political concerns in such enigmatic aquatints as *Portuguese Men of War* 1961 but also to take the principles of printmaking into a means of producing public murals for amongst others, the Lisbon metro using etched limestone.

While the history of printmaking is often marked out by innovation, (Hercules Seghers experiments with open bite etching and colour, Rembrandt's use of etching combined with engraving as a direct form of drawing, Toulouse Lautrec's radical approach to lithography, Marilene Oliver's constructions), there are many artists who are content to work within existing paradigms producing work which brings a tradition or convention into contemporary focus. Grayson Perry takes the convention of the printed map to conjure *Print for a Politician* 2005 an imagined land delineated by social groupings, or Emma Stibborn who

using woodcut to make impressive prints of those places on the edge of human experience as in ‘*Abandoned Whaling Station, Deception Island* 2006 or indeed Lucien Freud, who has been able within a very narrow approach to etching, produce work that addresses the contemporary viewer with his vision of what it is to be alive now.

Printmaking has a rich and varied history from which I have only touched on a very few examples and contemporary artists are building on this, revisiting the possibilities from the past alongside the opportunities offered through new technologies. There has never been a better or more exciting time to be involved in printmaking.

Paul Coldwell

Published in *Printmaking Today* Autumn 2010.